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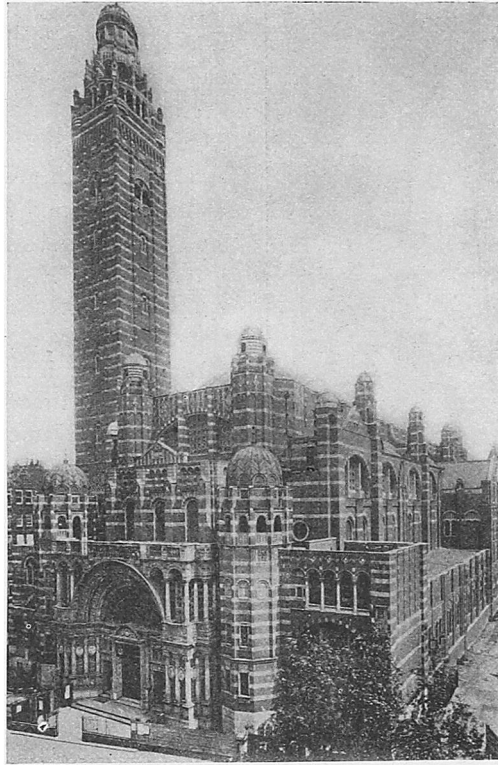
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LONDON—WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL, WEST FRONT

Current Art Topics

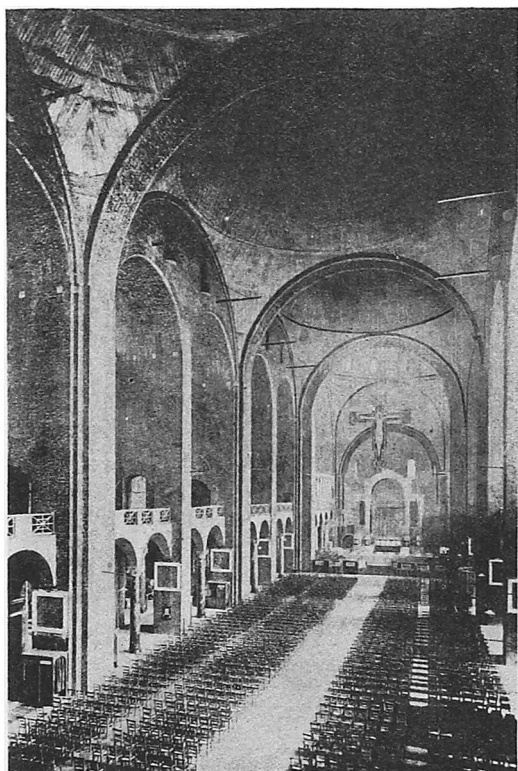
By "MAHLSTICK," London Correspondent

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THE Great Roman Catholic Cathedral at Westminster is admittedly one of the architectural features of London. It is, as we all know, mainly Byzantine in conception and strikes a marked note of contrast to the general character of English architecture of every period: this dissonance is emphasized and centered in the lofty campanile, which towers above the busy street at its feet, and compels attention from all comers. It is indeed said that such was the idea of Cardinal Vaughan when, after years of consideration, he de-

termined on erecting a building which should differentiate his community, its position and its claims, from the other religious section of his countrymen. In choosing the Byzantine so unfamiliar to Northern Europe, yet as distinctly a Christian architecture as Gothic itself, he certainly succeeded in accomplishing his purpose; equally whether the church pleases or displeases, for in neither case can it be ignored.

This famous structure can claim another distinction, unique in the history of archi-



THE NAVE, WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL

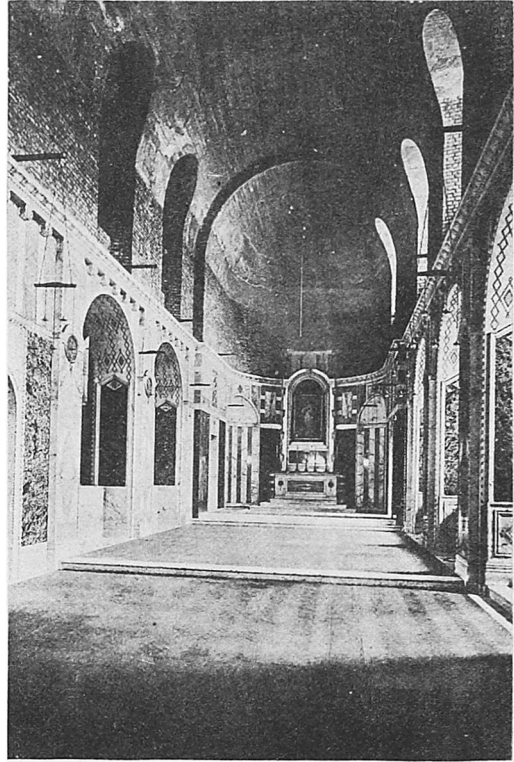
ture; it is, that the selection of Bentley as the architect was received with unanimous acclamation and approval by his professional brothers; this is truly remarkable when it is remembered that many of them might have justly hoped that it would be their good fortune, to have linked forever, with this monumental work, their own name and talents. Moreover the chorus of praise only formed the prelude to that which steadily continued to greet the unfolding in brick and stone of the design, and to the present day its pre-eminence continues to be proclaimed—"the finest building of its generation," "the rival of Barry's Houses of Parliament," "only surpassed by Sir Christopher Wren in St. Paul's," such is the key in which Bentley's work is described by experts. Yet we now come to the surprising phenomenon, that in spite of their unique acknowledgment

of its surpassing merit the Cathedral has not as yet gained the hearts and affections of the large public, and even of that Roman Catholic section whose beliefs and aspirations it materializes.

Our Anglo Saxon conception of Ecclesiastical Architecture is indissolubly wedded to the Gothic and its sub-types. I greatly doubt if St. Paul's itself comes to the mind of the average Englishman when he wishes to mentally picture some great Cathedral. The famous "Madeleine" of Paris, for instance, strikes him—viewing its exterior for the first time—as distinctly profane, whilst Notre Dame suggests sacred ideals as vividly, as one of Bach's or Handel's anthems, or a Lutheran hymn. So it has come about that the Cathedral at Westminster with its mighty dome, its arches of Egyptian massiveness, its towering Campanile suggestive to our Northerners of very different purposes, has yet to make itself a home in the affections of the community. Doubtless in the end, as the years roll on and associations and memories gather round it, it will become a center of affection, as it is already an object of pride to the citizen of London: this pride is evident in the general interest that is taken in the progress and development of the decoration of the interior. This is schemed to rival the great Cathedrals of Italy and Spain, in the lavish use of the precious metals, marbles and all that is rich and rare.

A hot controversy is raging at present, not merely within the Roman Catholic community, but outside it in the columns of the press, round the "Stations of the Cross" which are now being erected. It is contended on one side that they are a refreshing relief and a change from the traditional and conventional and insincere treatment adopted in religious art since the Renaissance; that they constitute a wholesome return to strength and directness of conception and expression, which characterized primitive art and which can only be rendered through the elimination of the

actual and the individual as opposed to type and the ideal by the adoption of more or less archaic conventions. The opposition indignantly assert that they are an outrage on the subjects they are supposed to depict, that the "Archaic" treatment is but a mask for incompetence and only holds up sacred persons and incidents to the ridicule of the irreverent and to the distress of the devout. Suspicious as I am of many things in art when variously labeled "Modern" or "freed from tradition" or as "having shaken off the shackles," etc., etc., still I remember the sincerity and fine feeling of some carved wood panels by the Serbian sculptor Mestrovic in his exhibition at South Kensington, in which Byzantine ideals were dominant. I thought that panels in the same manner and spirit might fit in very well with the decoration of the Cathedral, and it was therefore with considerable hope mingled with some doubts that I went to see them. As yet only five or six out of the final fourteen are placed; the designs are chiseled in flat, low relief on plaques some five feet square of white marble. This conveys to begin with a chilly, chalky effect to the spectator and I found it difficult to picture their cold whiteness chiming very happily with the general decorative scheme, rich and glowing as it is, or will be, when completed. A certain amount of gilding and coloring, such as we now know the Greeks used very freely on their statuary, would of course bring them more into harmony with their environment. I doubt, however, if there is any intention of doing this. After a brief survey of the design I came very regretfully to the conclusion that the artist has failed and failed badly on every point in his conceptions, and in their execution. I am forced to agree with those who denounce the figures as being in effect irreverent caricatures of the personages represented, they are akin to and—probably proud of their kinship—to the perversions of the Post-Impressionist and its allied



THE LADY CHAPEL, WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL

movements in latter-day art. The style is founded not on Greek or Gothic, but on the lines of Assyrian and Egyptian art. A departure unpardonable if one considers the pious purpose of these sculptured prayers, for that is what they practically are.

After the unfortunate selection of a type of art quite alien to Christian tradition, there follows a fundamental error in the scale of the figures, first in relation to the panel, secondly in relation to their backgrounds, thirdly in the proportions of the figures themselves. I do not think they average five heads to the body. The result is that the figures and the architectural features indicating the backgrounds look indescribably dwarfed, stunted and mean. The figures gain nothing in dignity or height by contrast with top columns and arches, whilst they in their turn do not

benefit by the dwarfing of the figures, yet both together appear to be on too large a scale for their panels. This inadequate sense of scale is apparent also in many points of detail. In one instance the Cross is represented as formed out of two planks of inch boarding, quite unequal to its burden, it also varies greatly in length in the different designs. These things convey to the spectator a sense of indifference in the artist, as to whether his work carries conviction or not. Very different indeed is Mestrovic in his Biblical reliefs. His figures, despite their angular archaic drawing and attitudes are of dignified proportions and the heads and faces have the expression proper to their character and the occasion.

But in Mr. Eric Gill's work the faces are frequently such as a child might do. In the "Taking down from the Cross" the profile head of the Mother of Christ is beyond excuse or forgiveness. I cannot conceive how the Cathedral authorities passed it. I can only hope that the criticism and strictures on these first may modify the peculiarities and shortcomings of the remaining panels.

The soldiers in khaki which, though there was no service at the time, were to be seen here and there at their devotions, brought the Great War even into this House of Peace. The sad strained eyes of a beautiful girl kneeling next to a young officer evidently near and dear, spoke volumes of weary and anxious days to come, when he would no longer be kneeling at her side—the sorrow of it all—the memorial tablets even now so numerous on these hardly dried walls showed many historic names already honored when that ancient fane, the neighboring Westminster Abbey, was still a-building, "Vavasour," "Kenelm Digby," "De Freyne," "Petre," "Chichester," etc. etc.

Quickly comes the thought with the Zepelin raids still fresh, that so noble a work, the pride of our own generation, may with

that venerable shrine by the Thames, the common heritage of the Anglo Saxon race, be engulfed in the fate that has overtaken their brethren of Rheims, Ypres and Louvain, etc. The "Season of Peace and Goodwill" is at hand, but contemplating the carnage and ruin of this World War, one is tempted to wonder if its Founder has not lived in vain; we behold men, those who boast themselves to be the finest product of science, literature, art and music, in a word of culture, discarding the ethical and aesthetic attributes of centuries of civilization, and showing no more regard for the priceless heirlooms of the race, or for the ordinary claims of humanity, than does the cyclone or the earthquake. Last Christmas was dark with the shadow of the war, but a year ago the end seemed nearer than it does now. The world then regarded it as a nightmare from which it would soon awake, now it regards its termination as a dream of some far off millenium.

In England art still flows along its accustomed channels, though in a greatly reduced volume. The various London and Provincial Societies and Municipalities have opened their autumn exhibitions. The Royal Oil Institute which alone of the London Societies did not have its annual exhibition last year, shows this October as usual. All this must not be taken to mean that art and artists here are unaffected; barely two hundred works were submitted to the selecting committee of the institution by painters outside the ranks of its members, against a normal average of about twelve hundred.

The Royal Academy, apparently, is not to have any winter exhibition; it has handed over its galleries, for war purposes, to the Government. Visitors to the exhibitions will also have observed that many prominent painters are not at all, or only slightly, represented—such as Birley, Fred Whiting and Lee Hankey; the latter painter known to America through Mr. Luscombe Carroll's interest in his work. The

International Society's Show is, I have heard, far above the average of recent years. I shall recur to it more fully later.

At a well known Artists' Club one evening lately, an old Mezzotint engraving after Metzù, which is reproduced, gave rise to a discussion as to the varied conceptions of feminine beauty and adornment which have prevailed since the days when the fig-tree did double duty as caterer for human needs; ministering to the outer as well as the inner man. It was contended that there is no such thing as "Beauty" apart from the seeing eye that it has no independent being, as for instance, the laws of mathematics or the moral laws have: Greek art is only beautiful to our taste because it is to our taste, not because it conforms to some higher law which it should be our endeavor to conform to. So coming down to particular instances, it was argued "that if it were otherwise, it would not happen that the Greeks considered the broad, low brow and clustering waved locks of Pysche as the ideal of womanly beauty, whilst the equally cultured Dutch of Metzù's day found their ideal in a bare, bald expanse of feminine skull; one might as well expect different races and periods to have different views about the multiplication table."

Against this it was maintained that in spite of such individual vagaries and contradictions of taste or more properly fashion, man has a sense within him which responds broadly and universally to certain definite contrasts, harmonies and proportions of line, mass, color, texture and surface which, whether exemplified in a woman, a horse, a tree, a flower, or a sunset, represent a principle as definite and as dis-

tinct from our precipient mentality, as those that govern the propositions of Euclid and that whilst these latter may be considered static or passive laws, the principle of beauty pertains to the activities of creative design and purpose as surely as to the ethical and moral principles; and like them it imposes its limitations. It is easy to see that the modern negation of the conception of the "Beautiful" as a purposed attribute of creation and the reduction of it to an accidental result or accompaniment of the interaction of the mechanical forces which are supposed to have chanced to bring about the present universe as we know it including ourselves—it is easy to see, I repeat, how thereby the road is opened to that strange cult of the foul, the hideous and the incoherent which disfigures so much of the art developments of our day.

Logically enough they argue as The Beautiful is only a name that has been given to a certain reaction of our sensory nerves, it may equally be extended to cover certain others hitherto excluded from the efforts of the painter, the sculptor and the musician. It seems a "long way" and a far cry from Darwin and Haeckel to Matisse and Strauss but to many of us the sequence is clear.

On a second visit to Westminster Cathedral I find that a very slight gilding and note of color is to be seen on the "Stations of the Cross" panels, but not enough to traverse my complaint of their cold, chalky effect. The photograph herewith gives a very good impression of the exterior, but the interior seems to defy all the efforts of the photographer to convey any sense of its vastness and solidity.